Debriefing the press: 'Exclusive to the CIA'

by William Worthy

In April 1961, a few days after the unsuccessful Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, Allen Dulles, at that time the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, met in off-the-record session with the American Society of Newspaper Editors at their annual convention.

Given the Cuba intelligence, by then obviously faulty, that had entered into Washington's rosy advance calculations, he inevitably was pressed to tell: "Just what are the sources of the CIA's information about other countries?"

One source, Dulles replied, was U. S. foreign correspondents who are "debriefed" by the CIA on their return home. The usual practice is to hole up in a hotel room for several days of intense interrogation.

Much of the debriefing, I've learned over the years, is agreed to freely and willingly by individual newsmen untroubled by the world's image of them as spies. In at least one case, as admitted to me by the Latin-American specialist on one of our mass-circulation weekly newsmagazines, the debriefing took place very reluctantly after his initial refusal to cooperate was vetoed by his superiors. But depending on the particular foreign crises or obsessions at the moment, some of the eager sessions with the CIA debriefers bring handsome remuneration. Anyone recently returned from the erupted Philippines can probably name his price.

Despite its great power and its general unaccountability, the CIA dreads exposes. Perhaps because of a "prickly rebel" family reputation stretching over three generations, the CIA has never approached me about any of the 48 countries I have visited, including four (China, Hungary, Cuba, and North Vietnam) that had been placed off-limits by the State Department. But the secret agency showed intense interest in my travels to those "verboten" lands. In fact in those dark days, Eric Sevareid once told me that Allen Dulles, the intelligence gatherer, differed with brother Foster Dulles, the Calvinist diplomat about the wisdom of the self-defeating travel bans.

Years later, I learned that the U. S. "vice-consul" in Budapest who twice came to my hotel to demand (unsuccessfully) my passport as I transited Hungary en route home from China in 1957 was, in fact, a CIA agent operating under a Foreign Service cover. During a subsequent lecture tour, I met socially in Kansas City a man who had served his Army tour of duty in mufti, on detached service in North Africa and elsewhere with the National Security Agency. Out of curiosity I asked him what would be the "premium" price for a newsman's debriefing on out-of-bounds China. He thought for a moment and then replied: "Oh, about $10,000." Out of the CIA's petty cash drawer.

My first awareness of the CIA's special use of minority-group newsmen abroad came at the time of the 1955 Afro-Asian summit conference at Bandung, Indonesia. Through Washington sources (including Marquis Childs of the St. Louis Post Dispatch), Cliff Mackay, then editor of the Baltimore Afro-American, discovered—and told me—that the government was planning to send at least one black correspondent to "cover" the historic gathering.

The "conduit" for the expense money and "fee" was the director of a "moderate" New York-based national organization, supported by many big corporations, that has long worked against employment discrimination. The CIA cash was passed to the organization's director by a highly placed Eisenhower administration official overseeing Latin-American affairs who later became governor of a populous Middle Atlantic state, and whose brothers and family foundation have long been heavy contributors to the job opportunity organization.

Because of the serious implications for a press supposedly free of governmental ties, I relayed this information to the American Civil Liberties Union. I also told Theodore Brown, one of A. Philip Randolph's union associates in the AFL-CIO Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Ted's response has always stuck in my memory: "I'm one step ahead of you, Bill. President Sukarno and the Indonesian government know all about this, and they are particularly incensed at having a man of color sent to spy in their country."

Cold-war readiness to "cooperate" with spy agencies, whether motivated by quick and easy money (I've often wondered if under-the-counter CIA payments have to be reported on income tax returns!) or spurred by a misconceived patriotism, had its precedent in World War I and in the revolutionary-counterrevolutionary aftermath. In the summer of 1920 Walter Lippmann, his wife, and Charles Merz published in the New Republic an exhaustive survey of how the New York Times had reported the first two years of the Russian revolution. They found that on 91 occasions—an average of twice a week—Times dispatches out of Riga, Latvia, buttressed by editorials, had "informed" readers that the revolution had either collapsed or was about to collapse, while at the same time constituting a "mortal menace" to non-Communist Europe. Lippmann and his associates attributed the misleading coverage to a number of factors. Especially cited in the survey were the transcending win-the-war and anti-Bolshevik passions of Times personnel, as well as "undue intimacy" with Western intelligence agencies.

After 1959, when Fidel Castro came to power after having ousted the corrupt pro-American Batista regime, Miami became a modern-day Riga: a wild rumor factory from where Castro's "death" and imminent overthrow were repeatedly reported for several years. Both in that city of expatriates and also in Havana, "undue intimacy" with the CIA caused most North American reporters covering the Cuban revolution to echo and to parrot official U. S. optimism about the Bay of Pigs invasion.

In the summer of 1961, on my fourth visit to that revolutionary island, a Ministry of Telecommunications official told me of a not untypical incident shortly before the invasion. Through mercenaries and through thoroughly discredited Batistianos, the CIA was masterminding extensive sabotage inside Cuba—a policy doomed to failure not only because anti-Castro endeavors lacked a popular base, but also because kindergartens, department stores during shopping hours, and similar public places were among the targets being bombed. In no country does one mobilize mass support by killing children in their classrooms and women where they shop.

On one such occasion a bomb went off at 9.08 p. m. Five minutes earlier, at 9.03 p. m., an ambitious U. S. wire-service correspondent filed an "urgent press" dispatch from the Western Union teleprinter in his bureau office, reporting the explosion that, awkwardly for him, came five minutes after the CIA's scheduled time. When that correspondent and most of his U. S. colleagues were locked up for a week or two during the CIA-directed Bay of Pigs invasion and were then expelled, many U. S. editorial writers were predictably indignant.

Except perhaps in Washington itself and in the United Nations delegates' lounge, the CIA's department on journalism is probably busier abroad than with newsmen at home. In 1961, during a televised interview, Walter Lippmann referred casually to the CIA's bribing of foreign newsmen (editors as well as the working press), especially at the time of critical elections. All over the world governments and political leaders, in power and in opposition, can usually name their journalistic compatriots who are known to be or strongly suspected of being on the CIA's bountiful payroll. I believe it was Leon Trotsky who once observed that anyone who engages in intelligence work is always uncovered sooner or later.

Even neutralist countries learned to become distrustful of U. S. newsmen. In early 1967, Prince Norodom Sihanouk expelled a black reporter after just 24 hours. In an official statement the Ministry of Information alleged that he "is known to be not only a journalist but also an agent of the CIA." In a number of Afro-Asian countries, entry visas for U. S. correspondents, particularly if on a first visit, can be approved only by the prime minister or other high official.

As recently as a generation ago it would have been unthinkable for most U. S. editors, publishers, newscasters, and reporters to acquiesce in intelligence debriefings, not to mention less "passive" operations. What Ed Murrow denounced as the cold war concept of press and university as instruments of foreign policy had not yet spread over the land. In the years before the Second World War, if any government agent had dared to solicit the cooperation of a William Allen

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